

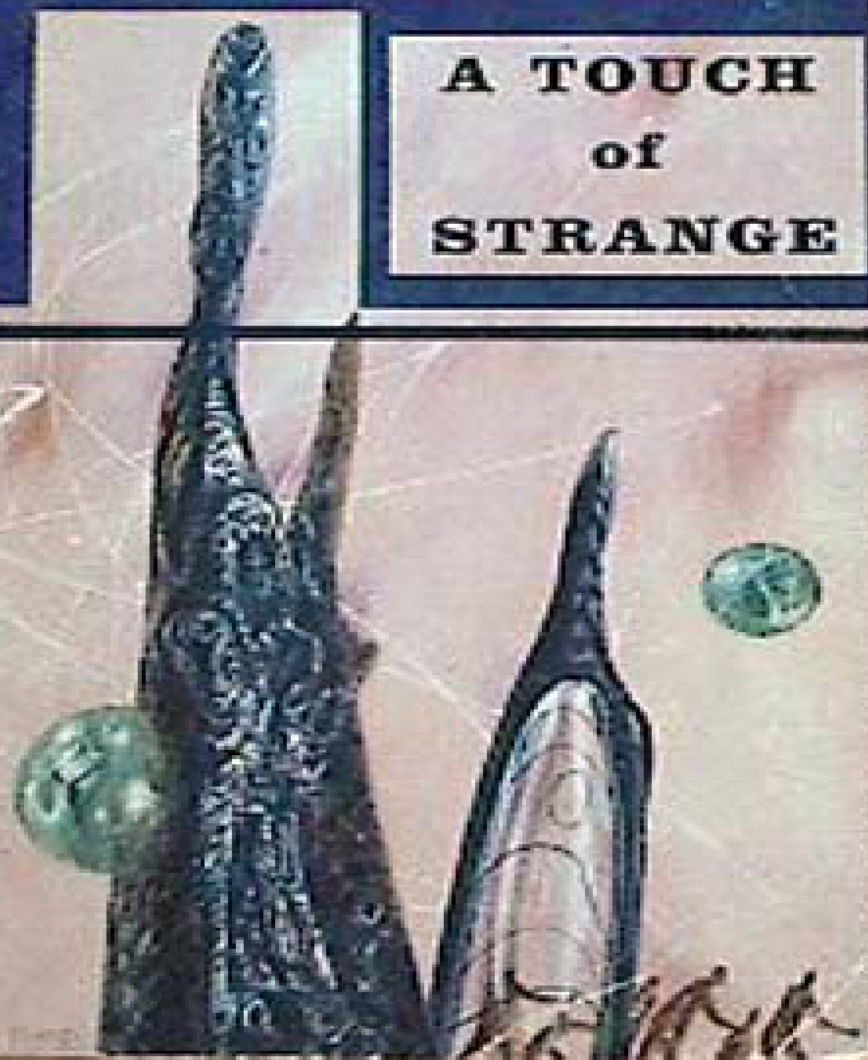


35c

THEODORE

STURGEON

A TOUCH  
of  
STRANGE



## POKER FACE

By Theodore Sturgeon

*“Face” was a remarkable poker player. Even more remarkable than his fellow players thought. It wasn’t just the way he stacked decks—*

Illustrated by R. Isip

WE all had to get up early that morning, and we still hadn’t sense enough to get up from around that poker table. We’d called in that funny little guy from the accounting department they called Face to make a foursome with the three of us. It had been nip and tuck from nine o’clock on—he played a nice game of stud. By one in the morning we had all lost six weeks’ pay and won it back again, one, two bucks more or less, and all of us were a little reluctant to go in the hole. We had a two-bit straight bet—a nice way for the lucky man to clean up quickly so that everyone could go home. But tonight there was no one lucky man, and when Harry jokingly bet a nickel on a pair of fours and Delehanty took him up on it, the game degenerated into penny-ante. After a while we forgot whose deal it was and sat around just batting the breeze.

“Screwy game,” said- Delehanty. “What’s the use of squattin’ here all this time just to break even?

Must be your influence, Face. Never happened before. We generally hand all our money over to Jack here after four deals. Hey, Jack?”

I grinned. “The game still owes me plenty, bud,” I said. “But I think you’re right about. Face. I don’t know if you noticed it, but damn if that winning didn’t go right around behind the deal—me, you, Face, Harry, me again. If I won two, everyone else would win two.”

Face raised an eyebrow ridge because he hadn’t any eyebrows. There wasn’t anything particularly remarkable about his features except that they were absolutely without hair. The others carried an a.m.

stubble, but his face gleamed nakedly, half luminous. He’d been a last choice, but a pretty good one. He said little, watched everyone closely

and casually, and seemed like a pretty nice guy. “Noticed that, did you?” he asked. His voice was a very full tenor.

“That’s right,” said Harry. “How’s about it, Face? What is this power you have over poker?”

“Oh, just one of those things you pick up,” he said.

Delehanty laughed outright. “Listen at that,” he said. “He’s like the ol’ mountain climber who saw a volcano erupting in the range he’d scaled the day before. ‘By damn,’ he says, ‘why can’t I be careful where I spit?’ ”

Everybody laughed but Face. “You think it just happened? Would you like to see it happen again?”

That stopped the hilarity. We looked at him queerly. Harry said, “What’s the dope?”

“Play with chips,” said Face. “No money, no hard feelings. If you like, I won’t touch the cards. Just to make it easy, I’ll put it this way. Deal out four hands of stud. Jack’ll win the first with three threes.

Delehanty next with three fours. Me next with three fives. Harry next with three sixes. Each three-spread will come out hearts, diamonds, clubs, in that order. You, Delehanty, start the deal. Go on—shuffle them all you like.”

Delehanty was a little popeyed. “You wouldn’t want to make a little bet on that, would you?” he breathed.

“I would not. I don’t want to take your money that way. It would be like picking pockets.”

“You’re bats, Face,” I said. “There’s so little chance of a shuffled deck coming out that way that you might as well call it impossible.”

“Try it,” said Face quietly.

DELEHANTY counted the cards carefully, shuffled at least fifteen times with his very efficient gambler’s riffle, and dealt around quickly. The cards flapped down in front of me—a jack face down, a six, and then—three threes; hearts, diamonds, clubs, in that order. Nobody said anything for a long time.

Finally, “Jack’s got it,” Harry breathed.

“Let me see that deck,” snapped Harry. He swept it up, spread it out in his hands. “Seems O. K.,” he said slowly, and turned to Face.

“Your deal,” said Face woodenly.

Harry dealt quickly. I said, “Delehanty’s s’posed to be next with three fours—right?” Yeah—right!

Three fours lay in front of Delehanty. It was too much—cards shouldn’t act that way. Wordlessly I reached for the cards, gathered them up, pitched them back over my shoulder. “Break out a new deck,”

I said. “Your deal, Face.”

“Let Delehanty deal for me,” said Face.

Delehanty dealt again, clumsily this time, for his hands trembled. That didn’t matter—there were still three fives smiling up at Face when he was through.

“Your deal,” whispered Harry to me, and turned half away from the table.

I took up the cards. I spent three solid minutes shuffling them. I had Harry cut them and then cut them again myself and then passed them to Delehanty for another cut. I dealt four hands, and Harry’s was the winning hand, with three sixes —hearts, diamonds, clubs.

Delehanty’s eyes were almost as big now as his ears. He said, “Heaven. All. Might. Tea.” and rested his chin in his hands. I thought I was going to cry or something.

“Well?” said Face.

“Were we playing poker with this guy?” Harry asked no one in particular.

When, by a great deal of hard searching, I found my voice again, I asked Face, “Hey, do you do that just any time you feel like it, or does it come over you at odd moments?”

Face laughed. “Any time,” he said. “Want to see a really pretty one? Shuffle and deal out thirteen cards to each of us, face down. Then look them over.”

I gave him a long look and began to shuffle. Then I dealt. I think we were all a little afraid to pick up our cards. I know that when I looked at mine I felt as if someone had belted me in the teeth with a night stick. I had thirteen cards, and they were all spades. I looked around the table. Delehanty had diamonds.

Face had hearts. Harry had clubs.

You could have heard a bedbug sneeze in the room until Harry began saying, “Ah, no. Ah, no. Ah, no,” quietly, over and over, as if he were trying to tell himself something.

“Can they all do things like that where you come from?” I asked, and Face nodded brightly.

“Can everyone walk where you come from?” he returned. “Or see, or hear, or think? Sure.”

“Just where do you come from?” asked Harry.

“I don’t know,” said Face. “I only know how I came, and I couldn’t explain that to you.”

“Why not?”

“How could you explain an internal-combustion engine to an Australian bushman?”

“You might try,” said Delehanty, piqued. “We’s pretty smart bushmen, we is.”

“Yeah,” I chimed in. “I’m willing to allow you the brains to do those card tricks of yours; you ought to have enough savvy to put over an idea or two.”

“Oh—the cards. That was easy enough. I felt the cards as you shuffled them.”

“You felt with *my* fingers?”

“That’s right. Want proof? Jack, your head is itching a little on the right side, near the top, and you’re too lazy to scratch it just yet. Harry’s got a nail pushing into the third toe of his right foot—not very bad, but, it’s there. Well, what do you say?”

He was right. I scratched. Harry shuffled his feet and said, “O. K., but what has that got to do with arranging the cards that way? Suppose

you did feel them with our hands—then what?”

FACE put his elbows on the table. “I can feel so well with your senses that I can catch sensations far too light for you to recognize. Ever see a gnat crawling on the back of your hand so lightly that you yourself couldn’t feel it? Well, I could. I can feel better with your fingers than you can yourself! As for arranging the cards, that was done in the shuffle. You grasp half of the deck in each hand, bend them, let them flip out from under your thumbs. If you can control the pressure of each thumb carefully enough, you can make the right cards fall into the right places. You all shuffled at least four times; that made it that much easier for me.”

Delehanty was popeyed again. “How did you know which cards were supposed to go in which places?”

“Memorized their order, of course,” said Face. “I’ve seen that done in theaters even by men like you.”

“So’ve I,” said Harry. “But you still haven’t told us how you arranged the deal. If you’d done the shuffling I could see it, but—”

“But I *did* do the shuffling,” said Face. “I controlled that pressure of your thumbs.”

“How about the cuts?” Delehanty put in, feeling that at last we had him on the run. “When Jack dealt he handed the pack to Harry and me both to be cut.”

“I not only controlled those cuts,” said Face calmly, “but I made you do it.”

“Go way,” said Delehanty aggressively. “Don’t give us that. How’re you going to make a man do anything you like?”

“Skeptical animal, aren’t you?” grinned Face; and Delehanty rose slowly, walked around the table, caught Harry by the shoulders and kissed him on both cheeks. Harry almost fell off his chair. Delehanty stood there rockily, his eyes positively bulging. Suddenly he expectorated with great violence. “What the dirty so and forth made me do that?” he wanted to know.

“Chummy, ain’t you?” grinned Harry through his surprise.

Face said, “Satisfied, Delehanty?”

Delehanty whirled on him. “Why, you little—” His fury switched off like a light going out. “Right again, Face.” He went over and sat down. I never saw that Irishman back down like that before.

“You made him do that?” I asked.

Face regarded me gravely. “You doubt it?”

We locked glances for a moment, and then my feet gathered under me. I had a perverse desire to get down on all fours and bark like a dog. It seemed the most natural thing in the world. I said quickly, “Not at all, Face, not at all!” My feet relaxed.

“You’re the damnedest fellow I ever saw,” said Harry. “What kind of a man are you, anyway?”

“Just a plain ordinary man with a job,” said Face, and looked at Delehanty.

“So am I,” said Harry, “but I can’t make cards sit up and typewrite, or big, dumb Irishers snuggle up to their fellowmen.”

“Don’t let that bother you,” said Face. “I told you before—there’s nothing more remarkable in that than there is in walking, or seeing, or hearing. I was born with it, that’s all.”

“You said everyone was, where you come from,” Harry reminded him. “Now spill it. Just where did you come from?”

“Geographically,” said Face, “not very far from here. Chronologically, a hell of a way.”

Harry looked over my way blankly. “Now what does all that mean?”

“As near as I can figure out,” said Face, “it means just what I said. I come from right around here—fifty miles, maybe—but the place I came from is thirty-odd thousand years away.”

“Years *away*?” I asked, by this time incapable of being surprised. “You mean ‘ago,’ don’t you?”

“Away,” repeated Face. “I came along duration, not through time itself.”

“Sounds very nice,” murmured Delehanty to a royal flush he had thumbed out for himself.

FACE laughed. “Duration isn’t time—it parallels it. Duration is a dimension. A dimension is essentially a measurement along a plane of existence. By that I mean that any given object has four dimensions, and these extend finitely along four planes—length, width, height, duration. The last is no different from the others; nor is it any less tangible. You simply take it for granted.

When you’re ordering a piece of lumber, for instance, you name its measurements. You say you want a two by six, twelve feet long. You don’t order its duration; you simply take for granted that it will extend long enough in that dimension to suit your needs. You would build better if you measured it as carefully as you do the others, but your life span is too short for you to care that much.”

“I think I savvy that,” said Harry, who had been following carefully, “but what do you mean by saying that you .came ‘along’ duration?”

“Again, just what I said. You can’t move without moving along the plane of a dimension. If you walk down the street, you move along its length. If you go up in an elevator, you move along its height. I came along duration.”

“You mean you projected yourself into the fourth dimension?” asked Harry.

“No!” Face said violently, and snorted. “I told you—duration is a dimension, not another set of dimensions. Can you project yourself into length, or height, or into any one dimension? Of course not!

The four are interdependent. That fourth-dimensional stuff you read is poppycock. There’s no mystery about the fourth dimension. It isn’t an impalpable world. It’s a basis of measurement.”

I said, “What’s this business of your traveling along it?”

Face spread out his hands. “As I said before, duration is finite. Suppose you wanted to walk from Third Street to Fifth Street. First you’d locate a sidewalk that would take you in the direction you were going. you’d follow that until it ended. Then you’d locate one that would take you from there to your destination. Where the one stopped and the other started is Fourth Street. Now, if you want to go twenty blocks instead of two, you simply repeat that process until you get where you’re going.



“Traveling along duration is exactly the same thing. Just as you enter a street at a certain point in its length, so you encounter an object on the street at a certain point in its duration. Maybe it’s near the beginning, maybe near the end. You follow it along that dimension — you don’t project yourself into it. All objects have two terminations in duration—inception and destruction. You travel along an object’s duration until it ceases to exist beside you because you have reached the end of it—or the beginning.

Then you proceed to find another object so that you may continue in the same direction, exactly as you proceeded to find yourself another sidewalk in your little trek across town.”

“I’ll be damned,” said Delehanty, “I can understand it!”

“Me, too,” Harry said. “That much of it. But exactly how did you travel along duration? I can get the idea of walking beside a building’s length, for instance, but I can’t see myself walking along beside ... er .

. . . how long it lasted, if you see what I mean. Or do *I* see what I mean?”

“Now you’re getting to something that may be a little tough to explain,” said Face. “You have few expressions in your language that could cover it. About the clearest way for me to put it is this: My ability to travel in that particular direction is the result of my ability to perceive it. If you could only perceive two dimensions, length and breadth, you would be completely in the dark about the source of an object which dropped on you from above. If you couldn’t sense the distance from here to the door—if you didn’t know the door existed, nor the distance to it, you wouldn’t be able to make the trip. I can see along duration as readily as you can see up and down a road. I can move along it equally readily.”

“Do you stay in one place while you travel duration?” I asked suddenly.

“I can. I don’t have to, though. You can go forward and upward while you curve to the left, can’t you? Mix ‘em any way you like.”

Harry piped up. “You say you came thirty thousand years. How is that possible? You don’t look as if you’re much older than I am.”

“I’m not,” said Face, “in point of years existed. That is, I didn’t live those years. I—passed them.”

“How long did it take you?”

Face smiled. “Your question is ridiculous, Harry. ‘How long’ is a durational term. It involves passage of time, which is a convenient falsehood. Time is static, objects mobile. I can’t explain a true state of affair from the basis of a false conception.”

HARRY shut up. I asked him something that had been bothering me. “Where did you come from, Face, and—why?”

He looked at me deeply, that eyebrow ridge rising a trifle. “I came—I was sent. I came because I was qualified for the job. I was sent because—well, someone had to be sent, to restore the balance of the city.”

“What city?”

“I don’t know. It had a name, I suppose, but it was forgotten. There was no need for a name. Do you name your toothbrush, or your bed sheets, or anything else that has been nearly part of you all your life?

No one ever left the city, no one ever arrived at it. There were other cities, but no one cared about them, where they were, who their people were and what they were like, and so on. There was no need to know. The city was independent and utterly self-sufficient. It was the ultimate government. It was not a democracy, for each individual was subjugated entirely to the city. But it was not a dictatorship as you know the term, for it had no dictators. It had no governing body, as a matter of fact. It didn’t need one. It had no laws but those of habit and custom. It ran smoothly because all of its internal frictions had been worn smooth by the action of centuries. It was an anarchistic society in the true sense of anarchism

—society without need of government.”

“That’s an impossibility,” said Harry, who had a reputation as a minor barroom sociologist.

“I came from that city,” Face reminded him gently. “Why is it impossible? You must take certain things into account before you make such rash statements. Your human nature is against such an organization. Your people would be like lost sheep—possibly like lost wolverines—under such a set-up.

But my people were not like that—not after centuries of breeding for the most desirable traits, living circumscribed ways of life, thinking stereotyped thoughts. Imagine it if you can—let me describe the life of an individual to you.

“He was born when he was needed. He was an individual from a mold. He was a certain weight, not the thousandth of a gram more or less than that of any of his contemporaries. He was fed the same food as they, slept exactly the same hours, learned precisely the same things at the same time. His pulse, mental powers, rate of metabolism, physical strength, range of vision—all were exactly the same as those of the same age. He needed no individual attention. He fought no disease, because there was no disease in the city. He was fed and clothed and housed by machines, and he was taught by them and quickly learned the way of them. When he was adult he was bred. When he was eighteen he had been schooled for two hours a day for eight years. He then spent one year working two hours a day tending one of the millions of machines that took their power from interstellar space and transmuted it into usable energies for the people and the structures. When he had finished that year he spent an hour each day for eight months in teaching the young the things he had observed about the work he had done. He gave instruction for twenty days less each year for twelve years and then died because he ceased to get fed, as there was nothing left for him to do. His body was transformed into raw materials of various kinds, with no waste. There was never any waste in the city.

“Now the city was divided into two halves, like the halves of a great brain. One half was dedicated to the supply of power, and one to materials. There were forty-five million people in each half, equally divided in age and sex. The flawless smoothness of the city’s operation depended on the maintenance of that exact balance between supply and demand, manufacture and the means to manufacture. For every death there was a birth; for every loss there was a gain or an equal loss on the other side. The equation was kept balanced, the scales level. The city was permanent, inexorable, immortal and static.”

“What they do with their spare time?” asked Harry.

“They lay in their cubicles until they were needed.”

“Were there no theaters, ball games—nothing like that?” asked Delehanty.

Face shook his head. “Amusement is for the relaxation of an imperfect

mind,” he said. “A mind that has been trained to do one thing and one thing only needs no stimulation or change of pace.

Remember—it wasn’t only that these people were educated that way and brought up in those surroundings. They were bred for those traits.”

“Why was the city so big?” asked Harry. “Good gosh, a civilization like that doesn’t *mean* anything.

Why didn’t it simply degenerate into the machines that ruled it? Why keep all those humans if they must live like machines?”

FACE shrugged. “When the city was instituted, there was a population of that size to allow for. Then, it had a rigid human government, and there was crime and punishment and pain and happiness. They were disposed of in a few generations—they were not logical, you see, and the city was designed on the philosophy that what is not logical is also not necessary. By that time the city was so steeped in its own traditions, there was no one left to make such a radical change as to cut down on the population. The city could care for that many — likewise it could not exist as it was unless it did care for that many. Many human offices were disposed of as they became unnecessary and automatic. One of these was that of controller of population. ‘The machines took care of that—they and the unbreakable customs.’”

“Hell!” said Delehanty explosively. “I wouldn’t go for that. Why didn’t the people push the whole thing over and get some fun out of life?”

“They didn’t want it!” said Face, as if he were repeating a self-evident fact, and was surprised that he had to. “They had never had that sort of life; they never heard or read or saw anything of the sort. They had no more desire to do things like that than you have to play patty cake! They weren’t constituted to enjoy it.”

“You still haven’t told us why you left the place,” I reminded him.

“I was coming to that. In the city there was a necessity for the pursuance of certain knowledges, as a safety measure against the time when one or another of the machines might need rebuilding by a man who understood them. Now the machines which supplied the people with everything from baby pap to muscle rubs, transportation to air conditioning, naturally covered such a vast number of highly specialized fields that it was necessary to maintain quite a number of

men educated along these lines. There was only one of these men detailed to each field—astronomy, astrophysics, biology, and so on. He learned what his predecessor knew and spent the years of his life learning what else he might and teaching it to the next in line.

“One of these men was an antiquarian named Hark Vegas, which is really not a name at all but a combination of sounds indicating a number. His field was history—the development of all about him, from its earliest recorded mythologies and beyond that to its most logical sources. In the interests of the city, he so applied himself to his work that he uncovered certain imponderables—historical trends which were neither logical nor in harmony with the records. They were of no importance, perhaps, but their existence interfered with the perfection of his understanding. The only way he could untangle these unimportant matters was to investigate them personally. And so—that is what he did.

“He waited until his successor was thoroughly trained, so that in any eventuality the city would not be left without an antiquarian for more than a very little while, and he studied carefully the records of the city’s customs. These forbade any citizen’s leaving the city, and carefully described the boundaries thereof. They were so very old, however, that they neglected to stipulate the boundaries along the duration dimension, since duration perception was a development of only the past four or five thousand years. As an antiquarian, Hark Vegas was familiar with the technique. He moved himself out along the duration of a metallic fragment and thus disappeared from the city.

“Now this unheard-of happening disturbed the timeless balance of the city, for Hark Vegas was nowhere to be found. Within seconds of his disappearance, news of it had reached the other half of the city, and the group of specialists there.

“The matter involved me immediately for several reasons. In the first place, my field was—damn it, there’s no word for it in your language yet. It’s a mental science and has to do with time perceptions. At any rate, I was the only one whose field enabled him to reason where Hark Vegas had gone. Secondly, Hark Vegas was my contemporary in the other half of the city. We would both be replaced within a week, but during that week there would be one too many in my half of the city, one too few in his—an intolerable, absolutely unprecedented state of affairs. There was only one thing to do, since I was qualified, and that was to find him and bring him back. My leaving would restore the balance; if I were successful in finding him, our return would not

disturb it. It was the only thing to do, for the status quo had to be maintained at all costs. I acquired a piece of the metal he had used—an easy thing to do, since everything in the city was catalogued—and came away.”

FACE paused to light a cigarette. The man smoked, I had noticed, with more sheer enjoyment than anyone I had ever met.

“Well,” said Harry impatiently, “did you find him?”

Face leaned back in a cloud of blue smoke and stared dreamily at the ceiling. “No,” he said. “And I’ll tell you why.

“I ran into a characteristic of dimensions that was so utterly simple that it had all but escaped me. Let me give you an example. How many sides has a cube?”

“Six,” said Harry promptly.

Face nodded. “Exactly. Excluding the duration dimension, the cube is a three-dimensional body and has six sides. There are *two* sides as manifestations of each dimension. I think I overlooked that. You see, there are four dimensions, but eight –

*directions!*”

He paused, while the three of us knotted our brows over the conception. “Right and left,” he said.

“Up and down. Forward and backward —and ‘beginningwards’ and ‘endwards’—the two directions in the duration dimension!”

Delehanty raised his head slowly. “You mean you—didn’t know which way to go?”

“Precisely. I entered the durational field and struck off blindly in the wrong direction! I went as far as I reasoned Hark Vegas had gone, and then stopped to look around. I found myself in such a bewildering, uproarious, chaotic world that I simply hadn’t the mental equipment to cope with it. I had to retreat into a deserted place and develop it. I came into your world—here, about eight years ago. And when I had begun to get the ways of this world, I came out of hiding and began my search. It ended almost as soon as it had begun, for I stopped searching!

“Do you know what happened to me? Do you realize that never before had I seen color, or movement, or argument, or love, hate, noise, confusion, growth, death, laughter? Can you imagine my delighted first glimpses of a street fight, a traffic jam, a factory strike? I should have been horrified, perhaps—but never had I seen such beautiful marvels, such superb and profound and moving happenings. I threw myself into it. I became one of you. I became an accountant, throttling down what powers I alone of all this earth possess, striving for life as a man on an equal footing with the rest of men.

You can’t know my joy and my delight! I make a mistake in my entries, and the city—this city, does not care or suffer for it, but brawls on unheeding. My responsibilities are to myself alone, and I defy my cast-steel customs and laugh doing it. I’m living here, you see? Living! Go back? Hah!”

“Colors,” I murmured. “Noise, and happy filth, and sorrows and screams. So they got you—too!”

Face’s smile grew slowly and then flashed away. He stared at me like some alabaster-faced statue for nearly a full minute, and then the agile tendrils of his mind whipped out and encountered mine. We clutched each other thus, and the aura of our own forces around us struck two men dumb.

“Hark Vegas,” he said woodenly.

I nodded.

He straightened, drew a deep breath, threw back his head and laughed. “This colossal joke,” he said, wiping his eyes, “was thirty-eight thousand years in the making. Pleased to meet you—Jack.”

We left then. Harry and Delehanty can’t remember anything but a poker game.

THE END